

## EXPLORING IDENTITY CRISIS IN NAYANTARA SAHGAL'S WRITING THE DAY IN SHADOW

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### ABSTRACT

*It was the brilliant Vedic era when Indian women were honored as Goddesses Lakshmi, Durga and Saraswati and put on the pedestals of glory, and so went the saying 'Yatra Naryastu Pujyante, Ramante Tatra Devta' where woman are worshiped, God resides. In other words, it was the matriarchal society, with the woman having her own prerogatives or better to say, there was hardly a line of demarcation between a man and a woman. With the advent of civilization, rules changed, norms changed, even the dogmas, so did the society with human values taking a strident turn to those prevalent before. The 'Nari tu Narayani', woman worshiped as goddess turned out to be a slave in the hands of her male counterparts, faced social taboos and even indignations. Gradually she started losing her liberty, priority and liabilities. In fact she started losing her own identity in the course of time and became a mere puppet dancing to the tunes of the patriarchs.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Lakshmi, Durga and Saraswati and Put on the Pedestals of Glory, and so went the saying 'Yatra Naryastu Pujyante, Ramante Tatra Devta'*

### INTRODUCTION

Indian women novelists have explored female subjectivity in order to establish an identity that is not imposed by a patriarchal society. They express in their writing their discontent with the plight of upper-caste and upper-class traditional Hindu women trapped in repressive institutions such as child-marriage, dowry, prohibitions on women's education, arranged marriages, suttee and enforced widowhood.

Nayantara Sahgal's *The Day in Shadow* reflects the permutation and combination of that golden era in the outcome of chaotic patriarchal society which blurred the human values to a great extent.

The aim of the paper is to explore a woman's plight at two levels – in marriage and the repercussions of post-divorce period with a shattering query: if divorce, which is sought painfully to liberate the self from the trauma of a wrong marriage, continues to lengthen its 'shadow', where is the likelihood of the dawn of a 'day' in her life?

### Paper

Literature is influenced by social forces and social processes; it affects the existing norms and behavior of the people in a society and changes the opinion and attitude of individuals. Indo-Anglian novelists have shown the shades in changing attitudes towards marriage as there are uneasy wives and forlorn widows in the novels. Novels follow life, as Indian woman follows her husband, five steps behind him. The New Woman in the works of women novelists tries to protest but the psychological odds against which she fights are peculiar. It seems that the idea that woman can be free, and yet good at

the same time is not acceptable to men. They believe that it is necessary for women to live within relationships, but if the rules are rigidly laid that as a wife or mother to do this and no further, then one becomes unhappy.

Nayantara Sahgal distinguished herself as an Indo Anglian writer of repute, with the publication of her five novels, two autobiographies and a number of other historical, political and journalistic writings. Nayantara Sahgal examines in her writings the tension between the Hindu culture and the predicament of the contemporary Indian woman. Her fictional work examines the social forces working on the psychology of the Indian woman. She is a pioneer in championing the cause of the New Woman in India, and she has given a new dimension to the function of fiction in society. She herself remarks:

I try to create the virtuous woman the modern Site, if you like. My women are strivers and aspirers, toward freedom, toward goodness, toward a compassionate world. Their virtue is a quality of heart and mind and spirit, a kind of untouched innocence and integrity. I think there is this quality in the Indian woman<sup>1</sup>

Nayantara Sahgal delineates with keen perception and sensitivity the problems and suffering of married women, who feel entrapped, doomed and oppressed in the care of husband, children and home, and shows the reaction to it in her novels. Some of the women characters in her novels accept their fate unhesitatingly, but most of them gasp for freedom, and gradually regret the stereotypical relations by going in for separation or for divorce to live a meaningful life. Sahgal recognizes woman-power but laments that Indian society has still not accepted this notion. She condemns self-immolation and suffering, and points out the virtue of the modern woman that, the courage, which is a willingness to risk the unknown and to face the consequences.

In mosaic of Indian womanhood which encompasses the various roles a woman plays as daughter, wife, mother, career woman, Sahgal concentrates primarily on single and married women

They wish to experience freedom and to become aware of themselves as individuals and to be accepted as equals, by placing them in restricted realm.<sup>2</sup>

Sahgal totally rejects the ancient Hindu code of Manu, by which a woman was bound to her father, husband, and son throughout her life and desires equality and freedom and condemns the traditional views

Doll, Gweru, Shudder, Pushup Nari Sakal Taran ke Adhikari<sup>3</sup>

There is always a connection between writer's life and his literary works; in the case of Nayantara Sahgal this connection seems to be far more intimate and deep, for her works range from factual and emotional autobiography to fictionalized autobiography. There are six novels to her credit. She treats consistently the concept of freedom so fundamental to the peace and progress of the human spirit. In Sahgal's writings a New Woman is portrayed who has the courage to break the tradition of marriage and had the confidence of living with the other person, which the novelist herself faced in her sixteen years of marriage.

Nayantara cherished a dream to marry a history professor and spending her life doing research into remote period of Indian history. But before anything could happen she was swept off her feet by an ambitious young man working in a British firm Gautam Sahgal, who was far removed from India's struggle as was possible. The values she had learnt had no place in her new life, and culminated in her divorce from Gautam Sahgal in 1967, after three children and sixteen years of marriage. Her obsession with and insistence on unhappy married women may be the result of her own unsuccessful married life.

Sahgal's world was not only different but ill-matched. There are incidents when she feels alienated and neglected. She realized that their world was not only different but ill matched which changed her life completely. She describes the turning points of her life in an article This Time of Fulfillment. The first was her marriage to Gautam Sahgal a businessman:

The two feet square room of my choice. Marriage unsettled me disastrously. For the first time I came across the shocking assumption of inequality. A man's ego and ambition, I learned, must be served first. In case of conflict, the man's will and desires must prevail. I was uneasy and restless adjusting to the demands of personality and an environment whose goals and texture was different from anything I had known and comfortable with. Eager not to be found wanting I became docile and obedient, a good wife.<sup>4</sup>

The realization that it was a world of her choice would have been of little help for every effort at adjustment was in some way a self-denial and a denial of freedom.

Despite being born and brought up in a renowned family, Nayantara Sahgal suffered lot in her personal life. The second turning point in her life was her momentous decision to have a live-in relationship. She admits:

My second turning point came when, for reasons beyond my control, I had to make a decision to live with this man without marriage. I think now of the splendor of Muriel Rukeyser's lines:

- Escape the birthplace
- Walk into the world
- Refusing to be either slave or slaveholder 5

At the time there were no heroics involved. There was a living to be earned and it meant hard work. I felt an enormous inner strength. In four years I wrote two novels and a textbook on the freedom movement for our schools, and established myself as a political columnist. Life became crowded with the problems of my growing children, and the torn-flesh feeling of divorce never left me. I am essentially a person who needs a great deal of solitude. I did not get it. I had to face the world continually at many levels, without the security of the married relationship or the cushion of money. And finally I stepped out too from the powerful support of "family" and "background," and became very simply myself. My second turning point taught me many things, but one above all: I knew I would never be afraid of anything again as long as I lived. It takes half of the life to achieve personhood but perhaps there is no greater glory.<sup>6</sup>

It was in the mid-sixties when Nayantara Sahgal met E.N. Mangat Rai, a person with whom she could share a great deal and with whom communication was possible. In her own words it was not an affair but a revolution, a self-discovery that life had to be lived more fully in order to be meaningful.

Nayantara Sahgal's novel *The Day in Shadow*, is a powerful explication of a woman's predicament after she seeks divorce to escape the onslaught of a rotten and conventional confinement in seventeen years of marriage. The novel highlights the discord in the married life of Simrit and Som leading to divorce through a series of reminiscences.

Nayantara Sahgal admits in her interview

In this book I tried to figure out something that has happened to me the shattering experience of divorce I wanted

to show how in a free country like ours where women are equal citizens, a woman can be criminally exploited without creating a ripple.<sup>7</sup>

The novelist narrates the story of Som and Simrit who seem to get on well during the first few years of their marriage, but Som's inability to understand his wife, except as an object of physical attraction, fit only for physical pleasure and enjoyment, compels her to seek human communication outside the marital bonds. Simrit is a hypersensitive woman who loves order and beauty because she considers them as her trade mark whereas He is ruthlessly ambitious and runs after money, wealth and other materialistic considerations of life.

Simrit longs for a world whose texture is kind and soft, whereas Som has his pound of flesh, compelling her with his urgency, which she resists staying separate, excluded and rebellious. She wants to enjoy her husband's company in private, somewhere remote, where she would methodically break down his dividing lines, melt one gesture into another, make them soft searching children with each other<sup>8</sup>

The marriage between Som and Simrit fails, for they do not succeed in getting each other what they fondly desire. Som, though engrossed with the materialistic pursuits of life, still holds on to Simrit through his consummation in sex. For Som:

Sex was no more just sex than food was just food. Sex has its vision too--of tenderness, of humour, of more than a physical act.<sup>9</sup>

When Simrit fails to satisfy him sexually, the rivet wall which seems to hold them together breaks and she remains separate, excluded, and rebellious. She is being treated not as a person but as a possession. Her attempts to keep her untouched further alienates her from him so much so that Som does not find any other alternative except by breaking himself off from his wife.

She yearns for individuality, freedom, and free communication of ideas with him.

Simrit is denied freedom and wifely privileges to be free in making choices even in small matters of everyday life such as buying covers and curtains, which results in suffocation and distrust:

Even there Som had had a veto She had dismissed the cook twice for drunkenness and bad behavior and Som had kept him on. Little things, she had thought at the time, nothing important, and nothing to quarrel about, but building up into a frightening situation herself a cog in a machine with which it had become impossible to live.<sup>10</sup>

Soma does not look upon women as human beings, having dignity and warmth of human passions that is why he ignores his wife easily in her presence. Ironically, the two meets like antagonistic selves in their own house.

Simrit's passionate appeal to live a life of involvement and friendship is dismissed as melodramatic by Som, a detached tone and a distorted look of emptiness and nothingness in his eyes signaled the end. He grows highly self-centered and uses Simrit, like others in the house, as a convenience, the spirit and the bond of attachment is concealed signifying the hardness of warmth and emotions. Simrit makes self-analysis and tries to intuitively get at what has made Som to resort to this stance of ingratitude and indifference. She is accused of frigidity arbitrarily and she has to bear the burn silently without uttering a single syllable in her defense. It is a world, she fully understands, where fault-finding and accusation is male-prerogative. Sahgal's opinion is true somehow in the modern scenario

May be she had been an animal, only a nice, obedient, domestic one, sitting on a cushion, doing as she was told and in return she had been fed and sheltered.<sup>11</sup>

Som has finally set the stage for separation and now it is for Simrit to walk out any moment. Simrit like a liberated woman has the courage to change a long kinship which appears meaningless with no sense of companionship between husband and wife.

Simrit meets Raj who helps her to understand the Consent Terms of the divorce, Raj treasures Simrit for what she is and encourages her to be independent. He believes that it is possible for a woman to live without a man to keep her identity. He helps Simrit to regain her equilibrium both emotional and intellectual. He proposes marriage and takes this decision knowing it too well that he is wedding a woman who has hordes of children and a tax problem.

Nayantara Sahgal herself decided to make life with Nirmal Mangat Rai without the conventional prop of marriage-decision forced on her, ironically enough; by economic considerations that was imposed on her as in terms of divorce settlement with Gautam Sahgal and relief from the economic burden was offered along with an imposition of her freedom to marry again.

Nayantara Sahgal have tried to underline the significant changes by creating illustrative situations and characters in different context; and have tried to chart the advancement of women from tradition to modernity. New Hero and New Heroine had emerged in the novel as Raj is ready to marry a married woman and a mother of a child along with the problems that are given to her by her husband.

The woman in Simrit becomes aware of herself as a person; she has gained realization of the causes of revolution and rebellion is affected through actions both of the mind and the body. And thus she finds affirmation of life and its fulfillment in her remarriage with Raj which is not a repudiation of marriage as a social institution or that it has outlived its utility, rather the remarriage is a positive projection of the bliss of marriage in right perspective: marriage is not a contract, a bondage to enslave one party and confer untrammelled romantic egotism and cult of the freedom on the other. It is a partnership between a man and a woman the success of which will depend on understanding, involvement and liberation from the conventional code of socio-religious ethos of life.

Simrit in particular is well summed up by the novelist herself in an article on a woman's plight in divorce:

"I wanted to show how even in a free country like ours where women are equal citizens, a woman can be criminally exploited without it creating a ripple. Again, I am not speaking of any recognizable form of exploitation against which most people will naturally raise a cry. If a man beats his wife, for instance, hardly anyone will condone the fact. But if at divorce he inflicts a financial settlement on her that enslaves her with taxes and makes it impossible for her to make a decent living no one will take any notice because this is a kind of beating where blood and bruises don't show. But in addition, and this is the crux of the matter-nobody bothers about it even when they do. Simrit in this story finds she has to serve as a tax convenience for her ex-husband all her life, and that tied up in this way, she will never be able to make an adequate living for herself."<sup>12</sup>

The analysis of the novels amply substantiates the view that the novelist indicts the evils of patriarchy and the resultant exploitation of women as a class in relation to the forces which have been alive in the past since the pre-Vedic society to devour the essence of a woman's individuality. As A.V. Krishan Rao comments while discussing *The Day in Shadow*,

Mrs. Sahgal fictional probe into the cancerous proliferation of social hypocrisy and political pretense in modern India is incisive like that of a surgeon's knife but is tempered with compassion and love. Its analysis and interpretation of the human predicament is informed of newer and truer insights in the human psyche.

Today it may be boldly asserted that a woman writing is a woman fighting. Comparatively speaking women characters of women writers boldly protest and assert their right in the society with firmness and dignity. They are fighting for their rights, for truth, for honesty, for identity, for freedom and for equality. They have depicted the inner characters of woman with all its conflicts and contradictions with authenticity and truthfulness in such a way as to carry our conviction. Indian literature spans a rich variety of themes - from the theme of a conventional woman to that of the new woman, reflecting in the process the changes that have been going on in the society and the woman seems to be slowly blurring and gradually shading off in to a New Woman.

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